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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT CLINTON EMPHASIZES JOINT MECHANISM, CONSULTATION, BUFFER ZONE DURING SRI LANKA VISIT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

(U) SUBJECT: Former President Clinton Emphasizes Joint Mechanism, Consultation, Buffer Zone During Sri Lanka Visit

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Former President Clinton visited a tsunami-hit area in Sri Lanka's Muslim East where he heard

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complaints about the coastal buffer zone from NGO's and tsunami victims. He praised the proposed Joint Mechanism in

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talks with President Kumaratunga and publicly. Kumaratunga defended the buffer zone except in areas where land was not available. She criticized some NGO's for raising money but not delivering assistance, and for alleged high salaries. Clinton then visited Maldives but cancelled most of his planned activities except for an airport meeting with President Gayoom. The visit provided a useful focus on achievements and problems in the reconstruction program, and forthright comments about the Joint Mechanism and the Buffer Zone. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (U) Former President Clinton visited Sri Lanka May 27-28 in his role as UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Relief. Former President Clinton visited the east

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coast town of Kalmunai, met with and then was lunched by President Kumaratunga. He traveled to Maldives May 28-29, but cancelled most substantive parts of his visit. Ambassador accompanied Clinton in Sri Lanka.

Kalmunai: It's the Buffer Zone, Stupid

[1](#)3. (SBU) Since former President Clinton had visited a tsunami-hit area on the Southern coast during his earlier

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visit to Sri Lanka with former President Bush, it was decided that he would visit a Muslim town in the mixed-ethnicity (Tamil-Muslim-Sinhalese) Eastern coast this time around. The large Muslim town of Kalmunai, which suffered extensive tsunami damage, was chosen. After helicoptering in, former

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President Clinton went to the grounds of a local school, where he discussed tsunami reconstruction with government officials, local and international NGO representatives, and members of civil society. Highlights of the discussion were:

--Frequent references to the impossibility of rebuilding if the 200-meter buffer zone along the coastline were enforced. (Kalmunai is hemmed in by the ocean on one side, rice paddies and swamps on the other, and other communities to the north and south.) TAFREN (Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation) Chairman Mano Tittawela, who was at the discussion, admitted that the buffer zone could not be enforced in Kalmunai and pledged "flexibility."

--Urgent requests for moving quickly to build permanent housing to allow people to relocate from uncomfortable transit shelters.

--Comments that coordination mechanisms were in place in Kalmunai, but could be improved.

--Requests for programs to restore livelihoods.

In his comments to the crowd and to the press in the East, former President Clinton noted the problems with the buffer zone and stated his strong support for quick agreement on the Joint Mechanism between the LTTE and the GSL. He also said that he intended to visit all tsunami-hit areas of the country.

14. (U) Returning to Colombo, Clinton met with President Kumaratunga and a group of GSL officials. Mano Tittawella led off the pre-lunch meeting with a slide presentation on reconstruction which showed significant progress on transitional housing and projected starting dates for other areas such as permanent housing. An emphasis on livelihoods restoration was noted. Mano said that a UNDP-funded web-based project tracking system was under development and should be operational by August 1.

15. (SBU) Former President Clinton began the discussion by noting that much work had been done since his last visit, and that the planning process appeared far advanced and easy to understand. His job, which he expected to last two years, would be to accelerate the process. He commended the President for her dedication to the Joint Mechanism, and said that was why he had traveled to Kalmunai. What he had heard most about in Kalmunai was a frustration with emergency housing and a desire for flexibility on the buffer zone. There were ways to build in safety features along the coastline. "More than anything else, you need some flexibility there," he said. He also noted the importance of programs to restore livelihoods. He said that he was happy to hear that all of the countries of the region had agreed to have compatible tsunami Early Warning Systems. He also noted the importance of NGO coordination.

16. (U) Kumaratunga said that much work had been done and the situation seemed good, but that the GSL had to streamline the reconstruction process. She said that the Early Warning System was running into problems because, despite several conferences, the countries of the region could not decide which country would host the main system. She suggested the UN could coordinate this decision, since "the countries seem unable to decide."

17. (SBU) Kumaratunga then said she wanted to mention a "budding problem." Some NGO's, she said, were still collecting tsunami money, and had even signed agreements with the GSL for tasks such as construction of new housing, but they were not performing. They were even using these agreements to raise additional money. Some NGO's had started an anti-GSL email campaign. The GSL had put in new regulations which would require NGO's to declare their funds and projects. Some NGO's were paying their expatriate staff exorbitant salaries, with some NGO leaders being paid \$30-40,000 per month. They were importing luxury vehicles which cost \$200,000. Former President Clinton responded that if there were specific problems with NGO's, the GSL should notify him and he would run them down.

18. (SBU) Former President Clinton continued that the buffer zone was a big problem, and in Kalmunai it was a physical impossibility. Fairly or not it has become a symbol of the criticism that all decisions are made in Colombo, and a surrogate for a host of anxieties. To meet the time targets which the Government had set, there would need to be some flexibility.

19. (SBU) President Kumaratunga responded that of the nine districts which had been extensively affected by the tsunami, only two--Jaffna and Amparai (where Kalmunai is located)--had a problem with the buffer zone because of lack of available land. The people supported the buffer zone; it was the NGO's and "some political parties" which were shouting. Kumaratunga said that the Government had interviewed 1800 families in the South, and all except two had wanted to move away from the ocean. In Amparai and Jaffna the Government would have to be flexible, and was considering building sea walls to protect the coast. She turned to the Government Agent (highest-ranking local official) from Batticaloa and asked him if it were not true that the people wanted to move. He (courageously) replied: "Some do, some don't."

110. (SBU) Kumaratunga then thanked former President Clinton for his support on the Joint Mechanism (JM). The majority of Sri Lankans, she said, think something like the JM needs to happen. The JM is not part of the Peace process, but "will open doors" for peace. The Muslims had expressed some concerns regarding the JM, but she thought they were being overcome. A "so-called extremist group" (i.e., the JVP) had an objection in principle to the JM, and the GSL was discussing this issue intensely with them. "As Head of State," she said, "I cannot turn my back on an offer by the LTTE to work together." Therefore she had committed herself and her government to the JM. The opposition UNP had not given a clear view on the JM, and had refused thus far to discuss it with the Government, although there were signs they might be changing that position.

11. (SBU) The party then joined a group of about 60 for lunch, where the conversation was largely non-substantive. However, during the lunch Ambassador asked President Kumaratunga if it was true that she would be heading to New Delhi soon to discuss the Joint Mechanism. Kumaratunga confirmed that was the case, and said she hoped to travel in the following week. (Note: subsequent press reports are that she will travel on Thursday, June 2.) Kumaratunga said that she did not think that the GOI would have any substantive objection to the JM once she had explained it properly.

Meeting the TRO

12. (SBU) After lunch, former President Clinton met with civil society groups. Of note, the LTTE-affiliated Tamil Relief Organization (TRO) snuck a camera into the room and took a picture of Clinton shaking hands with the TRO representative. The photo was subsequently published on the pro-LTTE website Tamilnet. This has led to some adverse press commentary in Colombo. (n.b., The TRO is a legal organization in both Sri Lanka and the US.) At a final press conference before departure, Clinton reprised his themes on the Joint Mechanism and the buffer zone. (See septel for media reaction to the visit.)

13. (SBU) A visibly-fatigued Clinton then left for Maldives, where he cancelled most of his program except for an airport arrival meeting with President Gayoom. Ambassador had intended to travel to Maldives to accompany Clinton, but cancelled his trip when UN and Clinton staff told him they were scrubbing the substantive portion of the visit. Presidential Spokesman Dr. Ahmed Shaheed told us that Gayoom had a lively and productive discussion on Maldives' immediate reconstruction needs with Clinton.

COMMENT

14. (C) The Clinton visit was useful in drawing attention to both the successes and continuing problems in the tsunami reconstruction effort. Clinton was forthright in both his praise for the Government's Joint Mechanism efforts and in his criticism of the buffer zone. The Kalmunai trip gave him a good opportunity to hear the voices on the ground--both tsunami victims and relief agencies. It was good to hear from

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Kumaratunga that she is willing to be flexible on the buffer zone in some areas, but she is obviously still dedicated to it overall. Her comments about NGO's contained some kernels of truth --indeed, some NGO's have raised large sums but done little with them. Nonetheless, the exaggerated charges she made were disturbing. They are unfortunately reflective of currents which are becoming increasingly common within Sri Lankan society, however.

They Couldn't Have Done It Without Us

15. (U) The visit was officially under UN auspices, and UN agencies here had the ostensible lead. However, the success of the visit was due in large part to hard work by sections of the Embassy, including DAO, RSO, GSO and PA, who provided invaluable support to a UN presence which clearly was not familiar with the demands of a high-profile visit.

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